



News Releases

How Researchers Maximize Their Readiness

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140205-N-AA484-001 SAN DIEGO (Feb. 05, 2014) Lt. Cmdr. Paul Graf, Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSD)'s Division Head of Microbiology, Molecular and Immunodiagnostics, poses in front of petri dishes for testing. In November 2013 he and 28 others from around the world were certified as American Board of Medical Microbiology (ABMM) diplomates. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Sean P. Lenahan/Released)

SAN DIEGO—The main goal for scientists who conduct research in support of military medicine is keeping U.S. warfighters mission ready. But how do scientists and researchers maintain their own readiness? How do they sustain their ability to continually innovate, evolve their skills, and find better ways of keeping service members healthy?

One way is by attending professional meetings where the best and brightest scientific minds come together, face-to-face, to share new research findings, explore emerging trends, discover novel technologies, and—perhaps most important of all—get to know each other.

The American Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene's (ASTMH) 65th annual meeting, Nov. 13-17 in Atlanta, Georgia, provided the perfect opportunity for Navy Medicine researchers to hone their own readiness by attending a meeting that draws about 4,000 of the top global health professionals. This five-day meeting offered updates on research studies involving tropical medicine, educational courses, lectures, poster presentations, and plenty of opportunities for scientists, clinicians, and sponsors to rub elbows.

"This conference allows us to see the latest research in the field of tropical medicine," said Lt. Cmdr. Paul Graf, a microbiologist and head of biosurveillance at the Naval Health Research Center (NHRC). "Many diseases of military relevance are the focus of this meeting, including malaria, diarrheal diseases, and dengue. Nearly all of these diseases are deployment health issues."

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As long as militaries have deployed, either in support of combat or humanitarian missions, infectious diseases have hindered readiness and mission accomplishment. A mosquito and the diseases it carries can bring down an army or disable a fleet.

“During the early years of the nation in conflicts such as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War, infectious diseases resulted in far greater casualties than battle,” said Capt. Patrick Blair, a Navy microbiologist at NHRC. “The 1918 influenza outbreak killed more people globally than World War I.”

As recently as Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the majority of non-battle health threats were due to diarrhea, vector-borne, and respiratory diseases or drug-resistant wound infections, said Blair.

When it comes to battling these diseases to keep troops healthy and support global public health initiatives, knowledge is power and conferences like the ASTMH are powerhouses when it comes to delivering opportunities to increase learning.

“The concentration of knowledge and experts in tropic medicine is greater at ASTM than at any other gathering held during the year,” said Blair. “Attendees across disciplines learn new techniques and gain knowledge during presentation and poster sessions.”

For Graf, attending the conference provides an invaluable opportunity to learn what other researchers in this field are doing and to improve his own research.

“It’s important to see what other researchers are doing and how they are doing it,” said Graf. “I see someone else’s poster or presentation, look at the vendor shows, and think that I should be doing that in my own lab. It forces you to think about your own projects and how you can make them better. I get some of my best ideas when I attend a conference.”

Both Graf and Blair agree that networking is possibly the most important part of attending a meeting and that a chance encounter could lead to collaborative research projects and, for the mobile military researchers who may move from lab to lab during their career, it offers opportunities to build relationships with past and future colleagues.

“Getting a chance to talk face-to-face with military and civilian colleagues is crucial to getting some studies started or keeping them going,” said Graf. “We’ve all been busy and unable to respond to every email, but it’s hard to ignore someone talking directly to you. Plus, you get the chance to make personal friendships that make the science go more smoothly.”

According to Graf, having the chance to talk to researchers at their posters or after a presentation provides opportunities to discuss their work and talk about future collaborations.

“You don’t get that same opportunity by reading their paper in scientific journals even if you do get the same understanding of their work,” Graf said. “How many people are going to cold call another researcher to say, ‘I read your paper and thought it was great!’ or ‘Hello, do you want to collaborate?’” Hardly anyone. But, standing at a poster, it is much easier to plant the first seeds about starting to work together and exchange business cards.”

Readiness, health, and partnerships are the three main priorities of Vice Adm. Forrest Faison, the Navy’s surgeon general and chief, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. In a recent message from Faison, he emphasized the importance of providing the best care for our service members and strengthening partnerships to maximize readiness and health.

Ultimately, by attending professional meetings, Navy Medicine’s researchers are doing just that: improving their research readiness, sharpening their scientific expertise, and expanding their professional network so they can discover the pathogen causing the next pandemic or make a novel breakthrough to better control hemorrhaging, all to keep warfighters healthy and preserve their readiness.

As the DoD’s premier deployment health research center, NHRC’s cutting-edge research and development is used to optimize the operational health and readiness of the nation’s armed forces. In proximity to more than 95,000 active duty service members, world-class universities, and industry partners, NHRC sets the standard in joint ventures, innovation, and translational research.

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